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Subject: San Jacinto residents demand cleanup of pollutants
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<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/science-environment/article/San-Jacinto-residents-demand-cleanup-of-pollutants-5073344.php>

Tina Ramsay walks her pit bull, Lily, on Tuesday at River Terrace Park near a warning sign posted in Channelview, where a toxic waste Superfund site is located in the middle of the San Jacinto River.

December 18, 2013

By **[Ingrid Lobet](#)**

Residents from a San Jacinto riverfront community stood together on Tuesday to express concern that one of the most polluted properties in Harris County could be breached by a storm, spreading dioxin contamination widely.

Their fears are buttressed by a recent Army Corps of Engineers report commissioned after a summer storm in 2012 damaged a protective rock layer that had recently been deposited on the barrier.

The Corps determined that "considerable movement or loss" of the barrier had occurred during the storm. The rock layer is a temporary measure, paid for by Waste Management Inc. and International Paper, to stabilize the barrier while the federal environmental agency selects a long-term fix for the site.

Members of the San Jacinto River Coalition, standing in front of the Houston headquarters of Waste Management on Tuesday, called on the companies to clean up the contaminated site permanently by removing all affected sediment from the river.

Dioxins, which some health experts consider the most toxic compounds created by man, are heavily present in the sediments of the San Jacinto River near the community of Highlands, where two former paper plants dumped waste into pits. Parts of those pits or depressions are now submerged under 4 feet of river. The chemicals were produced as a byproduct of pulp bleaching.

The location of these industrial dump sites had been forgotten for years until Texas parks and wildlife officers, looking for the source of dioxins in Galveston Bay, rediscovered the partially underwater pits in 2005. They soon qualified for Superfund designation and then for



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the most serious National Priorities List.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, International Paper is the company responsible for the actions of Champion Paper, which generated the pulp-related waste.

Waste Management purchased McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp., a now-defunct company, in 1992. McGinnes was contracted to transport and dump Champion Paper's waste, according to the EPA.

Thomas J. Ryan, spokesman for International Paper, said "IP has cooperated fully throughout the entire containment process and continues to work closely with the EPA and the other responsible party on this site."

Jacquelyn Young, a spokeswoman for Texans Together, speaks during a news conference Tuesday in front of the Waste Management offices in Houston.

Ken Haldin of Waste Management said "McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. is a company that no longer operates but more than four decades ago contracted with a nearby paper mill to dispose of paper mill waste for a period of nine months at the San Jacinto River site. Waste Management was not affiliated with MIMC during that period, never operated MIMC, never owned the San Jacinto River Waste Site property and was never involved in disposal there."

Besides the recent Army Corps report, the impetus for Tuesday's action is to pressure EPA to select the most far-reaching cleanup option.

Jacquelyn Young, who leads the San Jacinto River Coalition project for a group called Texans Together, said the area up and downstream of the pits, north and south of the I-10 freeway and along the entrance to the Ship Channel had been lucky in the last storm. But, addressing the EPA, she said "we might not be so lucky next time."

Fishing from the river has also been a concern since the dioxin contamination was pinpointed.

Many no fishing warnings are posted, but Sarah Davis, a resident of Highlands and president of the river coalition, said people fish continually. Not long ago she recalled, she approached a woman in late pregnancy, trying to catch her dinner. "Please tell me you are not going to eat that," she pleaded with her.

People not only fish; some sell their fish, said Rock Owens, managing attorney for the

environment division of the Harris County Attorney's Office. In statements that are part of a lawsuit against the companies, fishermen have said they sold fish from the river to the general public. It is not illegal; the state health department has not banned such fishing.

Owens' office is also suing the companies, in what he believes is the largest environmental penalty trial in the United States by a government entity. Harris County is asking for \$25,000 per day from 1967 to 2005. "For three decades they've hidden this from the citizens and done nothing to fix it," Owens said. Trial is set for September 2014.

There are a total of three lawsuits against the companies, in addition to the administrative EPA Superfund process.

Valmichael Leos, the EPA coordinator for the site, said his agency is looking for a solution that will remove the contamination from the San Jacinto River waste pits without changing the flood dynamics of the river. He assured the residents the agency takes their concerns "very seriously" and is looking for immediate action from the companies.

Regards,

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